Veda Books

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Names and Groups of Books

The core of this collection is the set of four types of books, namely Rigveda mantra Samhita, Yajurveda mantra Samhita, Samaveda mantra Samhita and the Atharvaveda mantra Samhita; each type having one or more recensions. These are all poems, some metrical and some non-metrical. These are the earliest books of the entire humanity. Each verse in these books is called a mantra and they collectively number more than 20,000. These mantras are the inspired words *shruti* heard by the sage when they were in a super-conscient state as a result of their askesis. *Veda* is not man-made in the sense it is not born of human intellect, human imagination or speculation. The mantras are the perceptions of deep spiritual truths and occult phenomena revealed to these sages. The *rishis* number is more than thousand; they include several women also such as *vak ambrini, apala, lopamudra, surya* etc., we will mention more details later.

Associated with each of the four mantra-samhita books, there are *brahmana* books, *aranyaka* books and the Upanishad books. Thus the sixteen types of books are divided into four groups named Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. Rigveda denotes the set of Rigveda Samhita books along with their associated *brahmana, aranyaka* and Upanishad books. Yajurveda has two major recensions, Shukla Yajurveda and the Krishna Yajurveda. We give below the names of the books in the major or well known recensions of the four Vedas.

Names of The Books

samhita	**brahmana**	**arnyaka**	**upanishad**

Rig Veda (RV)

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">shakala</td><td>aitareya</td><td>aitareya</td><td>aitareya</td></tr>
<tr><td>kaushitaki</td><td>kaushitaki</td><td>kaushitaki</td></tr>
</table>

Sukla Yajur Veda (SYV)

<table>
<tr><td>vajasaneyi m.</td><td rowspan="2">shatapatha</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>ishavasya</td></tr>
<tr><td>vajasaneyi k</td><td>brhadaranyaka</td></tr>
</table>

m: madhyandina, k: kanva

Krishna Yajur Veda (KYV)

taittiriya	*taittiriya*	*taittiriya*	*taittiriya*
maitrayaniya	*maitrayaniya*		*mahanarayana*

	kathaka		*shvetashvatara*
			katha

Sama Veda (SV)

jaiminiya	*talavakara*		*kena*
ranayaniya	*chhandogya*		*chhandogya*
kautuma			

Atharva Veda (AV)

shaunaka	*gopatha*		*mundaka*
pippalada			*mandukya*
			prashna

The listing is not exhaustive. Several other *brahmana* books have been mentioned in the literature. However the above books are relatively well known.

It should be understood that there was or is no central authority which decreed that the books should be grouped in this way. This method has come down from the tradition which goes back to several millennia ago.

The texts of these books are overlapping. Each Upanishad book, for instance, is the last chapter of a mantra Samhita book or *aranyaka* book or *brahmana* book as the case may be. Shukla Yajurveda has no *aranyaka* book; its *brahmana* is named *shatapatha.* Its last chapter is the famous and massive *brhad-aranyaka* Upanishad. Similar *Isha* or *Ishavasya* Upanishad which is made of only 20 verses is the last or fortieth chapter of the Shukla Yajurveda Samhita. Many of the famous mantras from the Upanishad which are quoted frequently by speakers or in books on *vedanta* can be found verbatim in the Rigveda Samhita and other mantra Samhitas. These elementary facts should caution us against accepting simplistic statements found in some English books on Upanishads such as, “only the Upanishads are the books of knowledge; all other Vedic books like mantra-Samhitas deal with rituals” etc.

The sixteen types of books given above constitute basic vedic books. There are also auxiliary books known as *upaveda* and *vedanga,* limbs of Veda. *Upaveda* has books such as *ayurveda,* the science of healing, *shulba* dealing with geometry and the construction of the fire-altars etc., *vedanga* is made up of books such as *shiksha* dealing with the pronunciation, *vyakarana* grammar etc. We will not deal with these books here.

We will briefly review the contents of the four types of books namely mantra Samhita, *Brahmana, Aranyaka* and Upanishads.

Four Mantra Samhita Books

The four mantra-samhita books, characterized by their appellations Rik, Yajus, Sama and Atharva are made up of mantras. These are poetic verses, some of which are metrical and the remaining are not. There are three types of mantras in the four collections namely *rik* or *rk,* yajus and *sama.* An ancient authority characterizes the three types as follows: *rik* is a verse in one of the standard metres like *gayatri, anustup* etc. The number of syllables in a verse defines its metre; a verse in *gayatri* has 24 syllables divided into 3 *padas,* lines. *Saman* is a metrical verse chanted in an elaborate manner according to specific rules. The remaining verses are yajus. It is inappropriate to characterize the yajus mantras as prose. The famous litany *Shatarudriya* to the deity Rudra occurring in the chapters 16 and 18 of the shukla yajur veda or that in *kanda* 4, *adhyaya* 5, *prapatthaka* 1, (4.5.1) of *Taittiriya S*amhita of the *Krishna* yajur veda is one such non-metrical poem.

Rigveda Samhita is a collection made up of only *rik* mantras*;* Samaveda Samhita is made up of only Sama mantras*.* Both the Yajurveda Samhita and Atharvaveda Samhita contains both *Rik* mantras and Yajur mantras.

There is substantial overlap among the four Veda Samhitas*.* Ninety-five percent of the text of the entire Samaveda Samhita is in Rigveda Samhita. About 50 percent of the mantras in Shukla Yajurveda Samhita and thirty percent of the mantras in Atharvaveda Samhita are in Rigveda Samhita. Thus it is absurd to state that Atharvaveda Samhita is not sacred.

The total number of mantras in the four Samhitas*,* Rig*,* Shukla-Yajur*,* Sama and Atharva is roughly twenty thousand including repetitions.

We stated earlier that all the mantras of the four collections are perceptions of deep spiritual truths and occult phenomena revealed to the *rishis.* These verses couched their knowledge in heavy symbolism. Some moderns who do not care to understand the language of symbols label these verses as simplistic or childish.

The symbols used in these verses are of many types as will be clarified later. A majority of these symbols deal with *yajna* which is a Sanskrit word having several different connotations. This word is translated as rite or sacrifice. The outward ritual is only one aspect of *yajna.* In the *vedic* times, there was widespread performance of these rituals, which are fairly elaborate ranging in time over several days or even months. A typical ritual involves four types of priests, the fire-altar, the recitations from the mantra-samhita books and the physical offerings like the juice of the creeper Soma, the melted and clarified butter, *ghrta* etc. Every outward ritual has a corresponding internal *yajna* occurring in the subtle body of the human performer of the *yajna.* The

symbolism of the *yajna* will be clarified in the next two chapters. Since the Veda Samhitas frequently use the terms occurring in the *yajna* like the names of the four priests, the fire-altar etc., the entire Veda Samhitas are dubbed as ritualistic by persons who do not understand its symbolism. Some verses or whole hymns are recited at appropriate times in the ritual; but no one can point to the presence of the details of any ritual in a single hymn of the four Veda Samhitas. Many mantras of the Veda Samhitas such as RV (1.1.1) explicitly declare that the priests in the *yajna* are not human beings, but the cosmic forces or deities like Agni, Indra; It is the deities like Mitra and Varuna who Light the fire in the fire-altar, RV (1.36.4) etc.

Thus every verse of the Samhitas has a double meaning, the so called esoteric meaning or the deep meaning understood in these days by the *rishis* and their disciples, and the external or exoteric or gross meaning understood by the commoners who attended the rituals. The commoners believed that by adoring the Gods such as Agni, Indra etc., by means of mantras and rituals, their desires would be satisfied. The device of double meaning of the Mantra was necessary for preserving the secret knowledge from being misused by unqualified persons.

The mention of the double meaning of the Veda Mantra has a long history going back to the earliest known *vedic* commentator Yaska. In modern times it was Sri Aurobindo who championed the spiritual interpretation of the Veda.

Rigveda Samhita

It is a book of more than ten thousand mantras, each in a specific metre, arranged in ten *manalas.* They were revealed to several sages or seers called as *rishis,* more than one thousand in number. Some of them are women too like *Vak Ambrni, Lopamudra, Surya, Apala* etc. Thus Hinduism is the only religion in which some of the earliest prophets were women also.

The spiritual meaning of some of the mantras are transparent; the meaning of others becomes clear after understanding the underlying symbolism. We will discuss the details of symbolism in the next several chapters.

Yajurveda Samhita

It has two major recensions, Shukla and Krishna. They have both metrical and non-metrical poems. The Shukla Yajurveda has about sixteen hundred mantras; about fifty percent of it is in Rigveda Samhita. It is made up of forty *adhyayas* or chapters, the last one being the famous *Isha* Upanishad. It includes several famous hymns such as *Shatarudriya, Purusha, Shivasankalpa* etc.

We will mention here its verse (26.2), second verse in 26th chapter, which declares that all the mantras of all the Vedas have to be taught to all persons, women or men, belonging to a high or low caste, or a stranger to the community.

Careless reading and translation have lead to the impression that Yajurveda Samhita is merely a book of physical rituals. As mentioned earlier, verses from this Samhita are recited systematically at various points in the physical ritual. At this point, we should make a clear distinction between the text of the Yajurveda Samhita and the commentaries on it by the *brahmana* books and the *sutra* books like *apastambha sutra.* Western translators like Keith or Griffith had no clue to the symbolism of the yajur veda samhita and hence they gave a ritualistic meaning for each verse based on the commentary in the *brahmana.*

Samaveda Samhita

It is a book of about 2000 metrical verses, all of which are in Rigveda Samhita except for 75 of them. These verses are chanted in an elaborate way labelled *udgita.* The text used for chanting is an expanded version of the basic text found in Sama and Rigveda Samhitas, obtained by adding several syllables. The chanting notation in the written text Samaveda involves seven symbols, unlike the three in Rigveda Samhita. Samaveda Samhita is the foundation for Indian music with its basic seven notes. One of the brahmana book associated with this Samhita is called Talavakara, i.e., one who provides the beat or rhyme in the music.

Atharvaveda Samhita

It has also names like *brahma* Veda suggesting its spiritual importance and *bhishag* Veda alluding to the many hymns in it dealing with healing in general. It has verses both metrical and non-metrical. It has about 6000 metrical verses of which about 1200 are in rig Veda Samhita also. It has a total of 731 *suktas,* 80 of which have non-metrical verses or prose.

It has several interesting hymns dealing with different branches of knowledge. It gives the foundation of decimal notation for integers stating that the relation of one and ten, that of two and twenty etc., are all identical, AV (6.25.1, 2, 3; 7.4.1). It has the first definition of mathematical infinity stating that infinity is that which is left after subtracting infinity out of it, AV (10.8.29).

It has several interesting hymns dealing with society at large. It explicitly states that that society was 'multi cultural', i.e., it had people who belonged to different religions *nana dharmanam,* and also people who spoke different languages. It calls upon people to make concord with strangers, AV (7.52.1).

It has the famous hymn to earth, *bhumi sukta,* AV(12.1), dealing with ecology. Its ideas on ecology go much beyond what the moderns have to say. It specifically notices the self-renewing nature of earth in its many aspects and calls upon human beings to act in ways which is in harmony with the general principles of earth.

It has several interesting hymns of spiritual importance such as the viewing the divine principle as a pillar *skambha,* AV(10.7) which supports the universe with its many planes *dhamani,* AV(10.7).

All Indian languages are full of epigrams or *subhashitas* (good-sayings) which reflect the many sided wisdom handed down by tradition. Many of these epigrams can be traced to the Atharvaveda. For instance the list of six psychological enemies *ari shad varga* such as lust *kama,* anger *krodha,* greed *lobha,* delusion *moha,* arrogance *mada* and jealously *matsarya* occurs in all languages. The Atharvaveda (8.4.22), also RV (7.104.22), explicitly refers to this list describing each quality by its associated animal or bird, the association itself being ancient. For instance the chakravaka birds denote lust, delusion by owl, jealousy by dog, destructive anger by wolf, greed by vulture and arrogance by eagle.

Brahmana Books and the Legend of Varaha

At the end of the age of the Samhitas the deep knowledge in these books was almost lost; however the texts themselves were carefully preserved by special methods of recitation known as *ashta vikrti* which are in use even today. The loss of *vedic* knowledge is mentioned repeatedly in the later books *purana.* It is said that the Divine Being assumed the incarnation of boar and recovered the Veda books buried in the depth. This is a symbolic way of expressing a symbolic fact which we can recognize if we pay attention to the Sanskrit words. The word for boar is *varaha* which also has the meaning of lifting up *aroha* that which is sacred *vara.* This symbolic legend refers to the attempt at recovering the lost or buried knowledge, buried in the realms of our subconscient.

The *brahmana books* are the result of the attempts to recover the lost knowledge. The recovery had two stages. The first stage was to record the names or details of the hymns of the Veda Samhita recited at the various steps in the outward ritual *yajna* and also to record the various steps of *yajna.* This is the content of the initial part of the *brahmana* books. The second stage deals with the contemplations and the philosophical issues, emphasizing the subtle nature of the *yajna.* This stage leads to the *aranyakas* and Upanishads.

We will focus here on the earlier part of the *brahmana* books. Recall that every recension of the mantra Samhita has its associated *brahmana* book. Thus the *Aitareya brahmana* is associated with Rigveda Samhita which has only one recension. The *Vajasaneyi madhyandina* Samhita of Shukla Yajurveda has *Shatapatha brahmana.* This *brahmana* book contains in itself both the *aranyaka* and Upanishad portions, i.e., of its 14 books *kandas,* the last book, 14th, is the *aranyaka.* Of this book, chapters 4 through 9 constitute the famous *Brhadaranyaka* Upanishad. This *brahmana* gives some details of the rituals in which the hymns of the corresponding mantra Samhita, i.e., *Vajasaneyi* Samhita are used. It is here we find some detail of the rituals. For example the *kandas* 6 through 9 deal with the construction of the bird-shaped fire-altar in the so-called *agnichayana* rite. These *kandas* give a ritualistic explanation of the mantras in the *adhyayas* or chapters eleven through eighteen of the *vajasaneyi* samhita. It is important to understand that when one reads the original of these chapters 11 through 18 of the mantra-samhita book, one barely sees any mention of the fire-altar. As a matter of fact, the chapters 16 and 18 constitute the famous litany to the deity *rudra* or *shatarudriya.*

The tenth *pravargya* of the *shatapatha brahmana* is titled *agnirahasya* or the secret of Agni. This chapter gives the legends and the contemplations regarding the different ritual acts associated with the mystic fire *Agni.* Recall that these rituals are mentioned in the earlier *pravargyas* six through nine. This chapter views the fire-ritual as a model of the cosmos and its dynamic activities. It sets

up a correspondence between the fire-altar and three planes or worlds namely the world of the physical matter *bhuh,* the world of the life-energies *bhuvah* and the world of the mental energies *suvah.* The correspondence is very detailed. The fire-altar is constructed of five materials namely stones, the filling earth and three types of bricks. This 10th chapter gives the correspondences for these items to those on the three cosmic realms mentioned above.

While placing a particular type of brick during the construction of the fire-altar, the chapter 16 of the mantra-samhita*,* the hymn to *rudra,* is recited. Before the commencement of this hymn, it is stated that by this recitation the bricks become *dhenavah,* cows. Outwardly such a statement does not make sense. However as mentioned in the mantra samhita section *dhenavah* is a standard symbol for spiritual knowledge. Hence the above statement interpreted in the context of a symbolic *yajna* occurring in the subtle body of the performer makes sense. In this inner *yajna,* a symbolic fire-altar is constructed and the entire altar glows with knowledge.

Thus even though the *brahmana* books focus on the external ritual, still there are passages, here and there, to demonstrate that the deeper meaning of *yajna* in the inner *yajna.* This deeper symbolism of *yajna* is given in other *brahmana* books also. For instance *aitareya brahmana* (2.6.3) of the *rig* veda states, "*yajamana* himself is the fire-altar''. The detailed quotation is given in later chapters.

Aranyaka Books

Aranya means forest. These were the books used by persons who have retired from the active life of householder *grhasta* and stayed in the forests to carry on their spiritual pursuits. These books mention *yajna,* but emphasize their symbolism, especially the inner *yajna* occurring in the subtle body of the human aspirant. These books naturally provide a bridge from the *brahmana* books to the Upanishad books.

Typically these books constitute penultimate chapters of the *brahmana* books. Sometimes they are separate books. For example Rigveda has a separate *aranyaka* called as *Aitareya aranyaka* which is associated with the corresponding *aitareya brahmana.* Some opine that they are different chapters of the same book.

Shukla Yajurveda has no separate *aranyaka* text, the last chapter of the *brahmana* book of this Veda is the *shatapatha brahmana* whose last chapter(s) constitute the famous *Brhadaranyaka* Upanishad.

Again *Chhandogya brahmana* of Samaveda has no *aranyaka.* It has the famous and massive Upanishad *Chhandogya*.

Upanishads

These books are clearly much later than the Samhita books. In course of time, the outward rituals became very strong; thus the crust of ritualism almost completely enveloped the deep spiritual knowledge of the *mantras.* The *rishis* of a much later age (one thousand years or more) attempted to recover the spiritual knowledge independently by means of *tapas.* The philosophical truths and occult knowledge recovered by the *rishis* are contained in the Upanishad books. The special feature is that these books are more easily understood by intellectuals than the Veda Samhitas. The Upanishads occasionally mention the Rig vedic *mantras* but to use them is not their main occupation. They are concerned with establishing the supreme truth. And in the line of their endeavour, they may and do refer to these *mantras* by way of illustration to find support for their own conclusions, comment on them whenever necessary and make a rightful use of them for purposes of propagation of spiritual knowledge to their disciples and truth seekers.

There is the list of 108 Upanishads compiled in the Muktika Upanishad. We are dealing here only with the famous thirteen Upanishads which are associated with a Brahmana book or Aranyaka book, typically constituting their ending chapter or chapters. They are famous because the great commentator on Upanishads, Badarayana quoted only from these 13 Upanishads in his classic *sutra* book, "*brahma sutras".* They are:

isha, kena, katha, prashna, mundaka, mandukya, aitareya, taittiriya, chhandogya, brhadaranyaka, kaushitaki,shvetashvatara, mahanarayana.

Note that the three Upanishads *mundaka, mandukya* and *prashna* which play a crucial role in the *vedantic* interpretations are all associated with the Atharva Veda, showing the sacredness of the fourth Veda also.

The text of all the 13 Upanishads put together is one half or less that of the Rigveda Samhita alone. The two massive Upanishads, *Chhandogya* and Brhadaranyaka constitute eighty percent of the text of all the 13 Upanishads.

There are several passages in these two Upanishads which are couched in ritualistic terms and would sound peculiar to the ordinary rationalistic person. We can understand their depth only if we understand the symbolism behind them.

Only if we have a mastery over the symbolism of the *mantras* of Rigveda Samhita, then the inner meaning of these apparently controversial *mantras* will become transparent.

Now we will consider the major traditional interpretations of all the Veda books.

Printed texts of mantra Samhitas

The Vedas were written on palm-leaves and birch-barks. The earliest manuscripts are dated very roughly around 800 CE and the first person to do so was Vishukra as quoted in Al-hind of Al-Baruni (born in 973 CE) [translation of Al-hind by Edward Sachau entitled 'Alberuni's India', Pub. in 1888 CE; reprinted in 2002]. The earliest printed text of the Rigveda mantra Samhita with the Bhashya of Sayana was brought out during (1848-1874) by Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900). Dr. A Weber published the text of Vajasaneyi Samhita of Shukla YajurVeda in 1852 and the Taittiriya Samhita of Krishna Yajur Veda in 1871; Dr. L. Von Schroeder published the text of Maitrayani Samhita in (1881-86) and Kathaka Samhita in (1900-11). Professor Stevenson published the text of the Ranayaniya Samaveda Samhita with English trnaslation in 1842; Eugene Burnouf (1801-52) produced the German translation of "Kauthumiya Samaveda Samhita in 1848. Roth and Whitney (1827-94) published the Atharva Veda Samhita.

The critical edition of the Rigveda Samhita with Sayana's commentary was brought out by the Vaidic Samshodhan Mandala in (1933-1951). Pandit Damodar Satvalekar (1867-1968) has brought out the texts of all the Veda Samhitas with good introductions in Sanskrit Hindi and Marathi beginning in 1918.

[The above information was obtained from the booklet "An Introduction to the Vedas" by K.S. Srinivasacharya published by the Alliance Company.]

Vedic Interpretations & Translations

The earliest explanations of the mantra Samhitas are in the Brahmana books which date at least a thousand years later (i.e., around 3500 BCE). Even though the Brahmana books give in general a ritualist explanation of mantras, in places they clearly mention the spiritual interpretation. For instance Aitareya Brahmana declares that *"yupa,* the sacrificial altar (i.e., the altar on which the animals are sacrificed) is really the yajamana or the performer himself".

The next commentary we have is due to Yaska (Circa 1000 BCE or earlier). He comments in detail on a hundred *suktas* of Rigveda. He first vigorously answers the critics of Veda like Kautsa who declared that Veda had no meaning. He then declares that Veda has at least thrice levels of meaning namely

1. the physical or naturalistic (*adibhautic*) interpretation in which the various cosmic powers like Agni, Indra are regarded as the physical powers of nature such as fire, rain etc.
2. the interpretation (*adidaivic*) of Veda as rituals or prayers for the popular deities like Agni, Indra etc., here yajna is viewed as external rites to please the deities who will give them favours.
3. The spiritual, psychological interpretation (*adhyatmic*) in which everything both within man and cosmos is viewed as one aspect of the Supreme One.

The next commentator (later than Yaska) is Shaunaka, author of Brihad Devata which explains some verses of Rig Veda.

But the most influential person in the first millennium BCE and later is Jaimini, the famous author of *Mimamsa sutras.* He convinced his contemporaries and later scholars that the purpose of Veda was the performance of external rituals only. The Veda mantras have no other meaning. This view was accepted even by the great Vedantin Shankara Acharya who declared that the wisdom is contained only in the Upanishad books and not in the Veda mantras. Shankara does not mention that some of the famous mantras of Upanishads are already in the Veda Samhitas.

The great medieval scholar Sayana Acharya (14th Century CE) wrote a voluminous commentary on all the Veda Samhita books and several Brahmana books. He focuses entirely on the rituals and gives detailed quotes from the books which give the details of the performance of rites like the Bodhayana Shrauta Sutras etc. He does not deny the spiritual viewpoint, but this is not his interest. Nowadays most of the English books on the outline of Hindu scriptures such as those of Radhakrishnan or Zehner declare blindly that mantra Samhitas deal only with rituals.

There are many other commentaries of Rigveda such as those of Venkatamadhava, Skandasvamin, Anandatirtha etc., which are ignored by and large.

But the commentary of some interest to us is that by Anandatirtha or Madhvacharya (13th century CE), the founder of the dualistic school of Vedanta. His commentary in Samskrt deals only with the first forty *suktas* of Rigveda. He stresses the *adhyatmic* interpretation which is expanded in the works of the disciples of his school namely Jayatirtha and Raghavendra Swami. Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (19th Century CE) also wrote a commentary on Rigveda upholding the idea that Veda deals with *dharma.* In the latter part of 19th century we have two complete translations of Rigveda namely that of Wilson (based on Sayana commentary) and that of R.T.H. Griffith. Swamy Satyananda published a ten volume English translation of Rigveda based on the commentary of Dayananda.

The exegesis and translations of Sri Aurobindo focus on the spiritual and psychological interpretation. Two of his books on the Veda are 'The Secret of the Veda' and 'The Hymns to the Mystic Fire'. The latter book gives the translation of most of the *suktas* dedicated to Agni. Sri Aurobindo has translated over four hundred *suktas* out of the thousand. His disciple T.V. Kapali Sastry gave a Bhashya or commentary in Samskrt on the first 121 *suktas* of Rig Veda focusing on the spiritual Interpretation. He answers in detail the questions raised both the medieval critics as well as the moderns like Professor Radhakrishna.

For the Krishna Yajurvedas we have Sanskrit commentary of Sayana and the Bhatta Bhaskara (who is prior to Sayana) and the English translation of B. Keith. All of them are ritualistic. For the Shukla Yajurveda, there are the commentaries of Uvvata and Mahidara and the English translation of R.T.H. Griffith, all of them being ritualistic. Swami Dayananda has given a Bhashya on Shukla Yajur Veda viewing it as a book of Dharma. Devi Chand has given a summary translation of the verses of Shukla Yajur Veda based on Dayananda commentary.

There is the English translation of Samaveda by Stevenson and that of the Atharvaveda by Whitney.

Mention should be made also of the compilations of Vedic hymns and their translations done by Raimundo Pannikar, Abinash Bose and Macdonnel. The book of essays by Ananda Coomaraswamy entitled "An Interpretation of Veda" focuses on the spiritual meaning of the Veda and offers a vigorous critique of the some of the Western translations of Veda Samhitas. M.P. Pandit discusses the problem of Vedic interpretation in his several books. A.B. Purani in his 'Studies in Vedic Interpretation' gives a detailed comparison of the translations of Sri Aurobindo and those of Sayana Acharya.

Professor S.K. Ramachandra Rao has discussed the problem of Vedic interpretation in great detail in his ten volumes of 'Rigveda Darshana'. He gives extensive Sanskrit quotations from the work of Yaska, Shaunaka, Anandatirtha, Sayana and also lesser known works which are very interesting.

Vedas and the Tantra

An important chapter in the spiritual history of India is the development of a line of spiritual discipline called Tantra. These Tantra Shastras are usually dated in the first millennium after Christ. Traditionally it is the scripture of the common man, open to all persons, without any restrictions of caste or scholarship. Many students of Indian culture believe that it is appropriate to call the religion of the modern Hindus as Tantric rather than Puranic. Tantra in Sanskrit has many meanings. As Sri Kapali Sastry points out, the relevant meaning of the word Tantra is "to act." Thus ritual - ritual is an act - is a characteristic common to all the Tantrik disciplines. The connection between the Veda and Tantra will be discussed.

It is not uncommon to find in some books on the history of India a statement that Tantra Shastra developed as a rebellion against the Vedas since the latter was theoretically accessible only to members of the two higher castes. The latter statement is not even loosely true since the Chandogya Upanishad indicates that the Vedas were taught to any student with sincere aspiration regardless of caste. Even otherwise, Tantra Shastra holds the Vedas in high regard and quotations from the Rig Veda are used in Tantra Shastra to support its approach. While the Upanishads represent an attempt at recovering the jnana or knowledge portions of the Vedas, the Brahmanas represent an attempt at reinforcing the ritual aspect of the Vedas, the Tantra Sastra represents an attempt at preserving and expanding the esoteric or the occult part of the Veda. A quotation from Sri Aurobindo is very appropriate: "The mental images of the Vedic gods in the mantras of Rig Veda (were replaced) by mental forms of the two great deities, Vishnu and Shiva, and their Shaktis and by corresponding physical images which are made the basis both for external worship and for the Mantras of inward adoration and meditation, while the psychic and spiritual experience which the inner sense of the Vedic hymns expresses finally disappeared into the psycho-spiritual experience of the Puranic and Tantrik religion and yoga.".

First let us consider the gods in the Tantra and the gods in the Vedas. There is almost a one-to-one correspondence between the gods in the two scriptures, not only in the outward description of their powers, but also in their spiritual import. In the Tantra, as in the Vedas, we find the recognition of one Supreme Deity as the highest along with the simultaneous adoration of a number of other deities. The Tantric gods, like the Vedic gods, have a twofold aspect: in their external aspects they are the powers of physical nature like rain, wind, etc. But, in their more important esoteric aspects, they represent psychological and psychic movements. For example, Agni of the Veda continues in the Tantra as Kumara, the child of the lord Shiva. In Veda, Agni is in the forefront of gods, their guide and messenger. In the Tantra, Kumara is the commander-in-chief of the gods and is looked up to for his immense store of knowledge and wisdom by the seers

of later times. The role of Indra in the Veda is taken over in Tantra, by Rudra who brooks no obstacle. The Sun, the highest God of the Veda, is addressed in the Tantra as Vishnu, a name used in the Veda itself. The role of the Aditi of the Veda is represented by the Supreme Shakti, called as Uma, Gowri, etc. It is true that there are new gods in the Tantra, but the prominent gods of the Veda retain their supremacy under different names and forms.

The Tantra, like the Veda, places a high emphasis on the Mantra. A mantra is not a mere letter or collection of letters with some meaning "it is the sound-body of a Power charged with the intense vibrations of the spiritual personality of the creator or seer of the Mantra. When a mantra is uttered under proper conditions, it is not the feeble voice of the reciter that goes forth to evoke the response of the gods to whom it is addressed, but the flame of tapasya (askesis) and realization that is lying coiled up in the body of that utterance. The Tantra, following the Veda, has formulated some seed-letters, Bijakshara, which the seeker uses as the Mantra. These Bijaksharas have been endowed with a perennial store of power by the Tantrik seers and it needs only the living touch of the Guru to set them awake in the disciple."

Sri Kapali Sastry illustrates the connection between the Veda and Tantra by considering a particular Tantra called as "Prapancha sara tantra.'' It is made up of three verses, addressed to Durga, Shiva and Vishnu. All the three hymns are found in the Rig Veda. The first verse is from the 99th Sukta of the first book of Rig Veda and is addressed to Agni. The second verse is the 12th Rik of the 59th Sukta in the seventh book of the Rig Veda addressed to Rudra, the Trayambaka, father of the three worlds. In the Tantra it is addressed to the deity Rudra as Mrityunjaya, the conqueror of Death. The third verse of the Tantra is the famous Gayatri hymn in the 62nd Sukta of the third mandala of the Rig Veda. In the Veda it is addressed to Savitr, the effulgent one, and in the Tantra it is "addressed to Vishnu", the image of all knowledge and power.

It is interesting to note that the group of the three verses, also called as Shatakshara Glayatri, is recited even today in the daily ritual for purifying the conch and the water. The symbolism is obvious: the primeval sound comes from its source, symbolized by the conch, naturally of its own accord when the impurities in the instrument are removed by invoking the Gods or the psychological power.

Unusual Nature of Rig Vedic Poetry

The *riks* are the mantra-perceptions of the *rishis* cast in metrical mould. The object or meaning on which the *rishis* meditated, the purpose for which they led the bodily life, the goal they fixed and established as the aim for the well-being of their followers and posterity, that object or aim the text of the Rig Vedic hymns. They may be what are called poetical compositions but they are certainly not the kind of literary compositions we are familiar with as described in the section 6 of this chapter. Nor is it Right to look upon these poets as composers such as are quite common everywhere in all ages and countries, even in our own day. This is no mere tradition. The *riks* themselves proclaim that the hymns are packed with truths perceivable only by the subtle intellect, related to subtler worlds, not visible to the outer eye, the presiding Gods or *devah* and their subtle laws. It is a mystic tradition that if one acquires competence for entry into the occult path, he could have direct access, even while living in the body, to these subtler worlds organized in a hierarchic order and their Gods. These mantras are renowned as the *seeings* - mantra-*drshti,* and the *rishi* is the seer of the mantra. The *rishi* not merely *sees;* he also *hears*. He finds too the Right word to express the truth he has perceived. Therefore the *rishi* in the Veda is known as the *kavi,* the seer of what transcends the senses or understanding. This seer of the Beyond is also the hearer of the truth; therefore that the poet-seers are truth-hearers, *kavayahsatya-shrutah* is famous in the Veda, RV (5.57.8, 5.58.8, 6.49.6 etc).

This seeing and hearing of the *rishis* is not of the ordinary kind. The eye and ear of the *rishi* are of an uncommon kind and so is the poetry manifested through them. The hymnal poetry is unusual, different from other poetry - even from the most superb specimen full of power, of delectable sense and delightful phrase and aesthetic appeal. It is not permissible, for this reason, to class Vedic hymns with poetry of a literary and aesthetic kind. There is reason for the special excellence of the hymnal poetry which lies in its mantra character. The power of the mantra is special. The meaning of the mantra may not be very high to our ordinary view, the language of the mantra may not be of a very high splendour, the idea suggested may not be very deep and its metrical diction may not be strikingly rhythmic. Still the power of the mantra does not suffer. That this faith in the power of the mantra has taken deep roots in the Indian peoples, God-believing and orthodox, from the Vedic times to our own days, is a fact that of no doubt whatever. This tradition of the mantras was guarded by later teachers and their followers. Such is the established faith in the greatness of the mantra-power that some even consider that there is no necessity of enquiring into the meaning of the mantra since the manifestation of its potency is not dependent on the understanding of its import. It is an ancient belief that the mantra is an extraordinary meaning of achieving all the ends of life. It is said that the 'Veda is an uncommon means of realizing what is desired and warding off what is

undesirable'. Here the word Veda signifies primarily the mantra. Why is the greatness of the mantra described thus? The Vedic *rishis,* though mainly devoted to spiritual discipline, were also well versed in the practice of occult knowledge and secret sciences. They believed that outer results could be produced by inner means and that thought and word could be so used as to bring about the realizations of every kind. That is why while most of the mantras are used for sacrificial purposes, there are many that are used, for the attainment of results not connected with *yajna*. Thus it is that the mantras are sacred not because of their mere antiquity but of their intrinsic power and also of their being the *seeings* of the *rishi.* Again some hold that the sacredness and power of the mantras is due to their sound-substance being the body of Gods. This too is possible.

Mantras themselves reveal the secret

But the real greatness of the mantra lies, as we learn from the mantras themselves, in the mode of coming to expression. There is a *rik* of Dirghatamas declaring that the abode of the mantra is the supreme Ether known as *akshara,* unmoving, where dwell all the Gods; and for him who knows this not, the *riks* have no use. Here is the *rik:* "The *riks* abide in the Immutable, supreme Ether where are seated all the Gods; what can he do with the *rik* who knows not that? Those who know that are indeed here assembled'', RV (1.164.39). There is this another *rik* in the same hymn: "The voice, *vak*, is measured out in four steps; the wise persons *brahmana* persons know them. Three of them concealed in the profound secrecy cause no movement; the fourth step is what men call the human speech'' RV (1.164.45). The import of this *rik* is profound. The *kavi,* the seer of the mantra, delves deep into the inner ocean of the heart, has direct perception of the Home of the Gods, the Fourth Plane *turiya* and expresses the truths he sees in the words of inspiration that are heard on the acquisition of the primal Word. Thus there are four stations or steps of the *vak*, Speech, that sets out from the supreme station of Unmoving. Of these, three stations are concealed in the secrecies, secret, not audible to the human ear and the fourth one, in its descent, is the human speech. All the four stages of Speech are known to the *rishi,* one who has control of mind, who is consecrated in the secret and inmost parts of his being, not to any other. Thus is it famous that mantras were not made but were *seen* by the *kavi,* the Seer, the *satyashrut*. And because the *paramam vyoma*, Supreme Ether, the abode of the Gods and the original source of the Speech of the *riks,* is not a creation of anyone, the Veda mantras manifested out of it are also by courtesy identified with it and are said to be eternal. The *paramam vyoma* has been there before the appearance and after the disappearance of the *rishi,* the seer of the mantra. It does not depend (for its existence) on the seer; on the other hand, the perception of the mantra is possible because of it. The mantra-word and its inalienable meaning are there in the sublime spaces of Ether, self-existent but their manifestation depends upon the achievement and competence of the *rishi.* That is how we see frequent mention made in the *rik samhita* of the *rishi* as the author of the mantra e.g. "O Seer, by the lauds of the hymn-composers'' RV (9.114.2). "They chanted the mantras carved out of the heart'' RV (1.67.2).

Eternality of the Veda and the role of rishis

When such *riks* clearly bring out the nature of mantras as being created, how, it may be asked, can the Veda be said it be eternal, uncreated? The *rik* quoted above refers to the original, basic *vak*, word, of the mantra abiding in the *paramam vyoma,* when it speaks of it as eternal. The entire Veda came to be understood as eternal on account of its origin in the *paramam vyoma.* Consider the *rik* (8.75.6) by the seer Virupa. "O Virupa, by the eternal word give now the impulse of the high laud to the Luminous One''. Even Sayana's commentary on the *rik* agrees with this. For he says: "By *vak,* is meant speech in the form of mantra, which is eternal that is to say, not produced''. In this view, as explained by us, there is no contradiction inconsistency between the eternality of the Veda and the authorship of the *rishi.* This has been clarified by Patanjali, author of the *mahabhashya,* while explaining the *sutra* (4.3.101) of Panini. Patanjali accepted the eternality of the word and idea contained in the Veda, but not of the arrangement and order of syllables, words and sentences. The arrangement of words in the mantra-verse is of the *rishi's* making for the purposes of making the Veda known. Thus both the statements that the Vedas are both created and uncreated are compatible. That the *riks* are poetry of an extraordinary kind wherein lies their mantra-character, is evidenced by the hymns of Dirghatamas and Virupa above referred to. There are hundreds of such instances in the *rik samhita* which describe the glory of Speech, but they are not mentioned here for fear of swelling the subject with details.

Yaska and Brhad Devata on the mantra

Now the outer meaning of the *riks* can be understood from Sayana's commentary. But the secret sense, as stated earlier, is dependent on the meaning of the symbols. Yaska, the author of the *nirukta,* also says the meaning of the mantra is difficult to grasp. According to him the mantra called '*brahman*' revealed itself to the *rishis* in *tapas, askesis,* not in any other way. He states: "It (mantra) *brahman* the self-born came to the *rishis* who were doing *tapas,* therefore they became the *rishis,* in that lies the *rishi* hood of the *rishis'' nirukta* (2.11). Elsewhere he observes that the purport of the mantra is difficult to know. "The shore (of knowledge) of the mantra has to be reached by *tapas*" *nirukta* (13.13). It is clear that in the view of Yaska there is no other means except *tapas* to understand the meaning of the Veda and that mantra reveals itself to the *rishi* stationed in *tapas.* What we have said in regarding the manifestation of the mantras, its eternality and its being a creation - all these are decisively substantiated not only by the mantras themselves, but justified by Yaska also.

The *brhad devata* supporting Yaska, says: "The mantra is not perceptible to one who is not a *rishi''* BD (8.129). The treatment in the *brhad devata* of topics like the *rishi's* capacity for seeing, the purpose of the triad (the three types of mantras), the efficacy of the rituals properly performed, goes without doubt to reinforce the position of the esoteric significance of the Veda. These are the dicta:

"He knows the Gods who knows the *riks.* They are to be approached through *yoga* with self-control and skill, understanding, general knowledge and above all *tapasya''* BD (7. 130).

"The Gods accept the offering of the sacrificer who knows the Deity of the mantra but not of him who knows not the deity'' (131).

"The Deity does not accept the libation offered in ignorance. Therefore the libation is to be offered to the Deity with self-control in the mind'' (132).

"He is like a God worthy of praise in heaven even by the Gods, who is pure and studies the Veda with knowledge of the Gods and the mantra'' (133).

Use of Veda for attaining objects

It is to be noted that though the sacredness and power of the Vedic mantra lies in its inner and spiritual meaning of the revealed word, it lends itself - even in the outer sense - to users other than sacrificial. This is the basis of the traditional belief that common objects in life also can be achieved by uncommon means. This is also the basis of works like Rig *vidhana* of Shaunaka that deal with the use of the hymns for the fulfillment of varied objects in life. Yaska refers to this truth when he says: "The mantras of the *rishis* are uneven, high and low, in their ideas''. The *brhad devata* also says as much: "Desiring the attainment of objects the *rishis* of yore hurried towards the deities with the mantras, so say the great seers themselves in the Veda" BD (8.137). If thus there are also mantras, which aim at the achievement of worldly objects, it may be asked, how could the Veda be described as the highly sacred store of spiritual disciplines and secrets? There is no inconsistency whatever. We have made it clear that the inner meaning alone is the supreme truth of the Vedas and that the external or gross sense is of use for purposes of sacrifice or fulfillment of objects in life. Looked at on the surface there is a manifest unevenness in the ideas of the *rishis.* Yet on scrutiny of the inner meaning, it will become clear that the swearing, curse, censure, praise and the rest are related to the history of spiritual discipline in the inner life. It is no wonder that to those who look only at the outer garb or who follow the western scholars the *rishis* present a picture of simple idiocy. We do not say that all the seers lived at the same time, led the same identical inner life and perceived the mantras. But this is the Truth we maintain: the same symbolic sense of the words, the sacrifice - both inner and outer - the cosmology of the worlds, the truth of the Gods, the supreme object in life - all these formed one common knowledge which the *rishis* drew upon for worshipping and communing with the Gods and to achieve the end by means needed for and suited to the particular state of inner development (individually). This should be clear to all diligent students of the symbolic and esoteric meaning of the Veda.

Specialty of the Rig Vedic Poetry

We need to stress on the peculiar character of the mantra, the revelatory origin of the world-rhythm proceeding from the Infinite and caught by the disciplined audition of the *rishi*.

It is not that there is no poetical charm or other qualities that we associate with Poetry. On the other hand there is sublime poetry in the Rig Veda-sublime even when judged from modern standards. What is true of poetry in a general way is preeminently true in the case of mantra-poetry. It must be borne in mind that to know the thought-content of a *poem* is not the same as to allow the soul and substance of poetry to invade and possess the sense and feeling and thought in the core of one's being in communion with the spirit of Poetry. Of the untranslatable elements in poetry, especially in the mantra poetry, the word-rhythm and the word-order stand prominently as the two wings of the soaring soul of poetic sound. Nevertheless, to the composer of the Vedic hymn it was only a help, a means for his progress and a help for others. The act of expression was just a means, not an aim. That is why pursuit of aesthetic grace or beauty or richness does not act as an incentive to the *rishi* for varying the *consecrated form* which was an accepted principle among the mystics of the Rig Veda. On this point Sri Aurobindo's view is noteworthy. He explains the apparent monotony in many places which even lesser minds could easily vary or break by simple or artful devices or common poetical conceits.

"Only out of the sameness of experience and out of the impersonality of knowledge, there arise a fixed body of conceptions constantly repeated and a fixed symbolic language which was the inevitable form of these conceptions... We have at any rate the same notions repeated from hymn to hymn with the same constant terms and figures and frequently in the same phrases with an entire indifference to search for poetical originality or any demand for novelty of thought and freshness of language .... The mystic poets do not vary the consecrated form which has become for them a sort of divine algebra transmitting the eternal formulae of the knowledge to the continuous succession of initiates.

"The hymns possess indeed a finished metrical form, a constant subtlety and skill in their technique, great variations of style and poetical personality - they are not the work of rude, barbarous and primitive craftsman...... They differ in temperament and personality; some are inclined to a more rich, subtle and profound use of Vedic symbolism; others give voice to their spiritual experience in a barer and simpler dictum ...... There are risings and fallings in the same hymn ...... Some hymns are plain and almost modern in their language; others baffle us at first by their semblance of antique obscurity. But these differences take nothing from the unity of spiritual experience. In the deep and mystic style

of Dirghatamas as in the melodious lucidity of Medhatithi, in the puissant and energetic hymns of Vishvamitra as in Vasishtha's even harmonies we have the same firm foundation of knowledge and the same scrupulous adherence to the sacred conventions of the Initiates'' (Sri Aurobindo).